



Policy Resolution 2022-12

Recreation and Tourism on Public Lands

A. **BACKGROUND**

1. Federal lands are concentrated in western states and are primarily managed by four agencies: the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Forest Service (USFS), Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the National Park Service (NPS).
2. These public lands are integral to the cultural, economic and social vitality of the West. They also preserve iconic landscapes and offer abundant outdoor recreation opportunities that draw millions of annual visitors, stimulate local and state economies, and provide social and health benefits.
3. Congress created the federal land management agencies for different purposes and missions. BLM and USFS are directed to manage for sustained yield and multiple uses, which can include recreation. Land administered by FWS is managed for the conservation, management and restoration of fish, wildlife and plant species, and recreation that is compatible to that mission is permissible. The mission of NPS is to preserve unique resources and to provide for their enjoyment by the public.
4. Federal lands are critical to all-lands management efforts that seek to provide for public recreation opportunities and conserve landscapes across federal, state, and private ownership boundaries. Management decisions made within federal boundaries can have effects on regional economic development and tourism, wildlife habitat and connectivity, cultural resource preservation, and other areas of interest to states.
5. In recent years, and particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, visitation at the most popular national parks has broken records and expanded into what was traditionally considered the off-season. Visitation and recreational use of BLM, USFS and FWS lands, which had been increasing in recent years, also surged in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
6. BLM reported 73.1 million visits in fiscal year 2020, an increase of more than 2.3 million over 2019.¹ This increase occurred even with pandemic-related closures for part of the year. Similarly, USFS estimates that national forests and grasslands received 168 million visits in 2020, an increase of 18 million when compared to 2019. USFS reported that visits to dispersed recreation sites and wilderness areas, which do not provide facilities such as bathrooms or fire rings, increased by 25 percent.²
7. Given their different management mandates, USFS, BLM and FWS units may not have the resources or staff in place to manage increased visitation and outdoor recreation uses.

¹ BLM Public Land Statistics, 2020 Report. <https://www.blm.gov/about/data/public-land-statistics>

² U.S. Forest Service National Visitor Use Monitoring Report 2020.

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/news/releases/new-data-shows-visits-soared-across-national-forests-2020>

8. Public-private partnership authorities are available to the federal land management agencies to attract private investment to improve, modernize, and expand visitor facilities to meet the increasing demand for quality visitor experiences.
9. Without the necessary visitor facility investment, infrastructure, staffing, and management planning, increased visitation can lead to overcrowding, damage to natural and cultural resources and tribal sacred places, and threaten tribal treaty rights. This diminishes visitor experience and jeopardizes the enjoyment for all, and for future generations, of these resources.
10. Increased visitation at destination parks is inspiring visitors to consider visiting traditionally less popular areas. While this distribution of visitors is allowing greater overall visitation, it should be coupled with increased investment in visitor facilities and associated infrastructure to minimize impacts to local water systems, wildfire risk, and other resources of local communities and states, including resources for search and rescue and emergency response.
11. In 2020, the four federal land management agencies had an estimated \$25.87 billion backlog in deferred maintenance projects for roads, bridges, visitor centers, historic buildings, trails, campgrounds, and other critical infrastructure needs. NPS accounts for the largest portion, at \$14.37 billion in 2020.³ Aging facilities, and limited resources have resulted in this backlog of deferred maintenance. The failure to timely maintain existing facilities and infrastructure combined with limited investment in new and expanded visitor facilities has negative effects on the visitor experience and economic activity in gateway communities.
12. In 2020, Congress passed the Great American Outdoors Act (Pub. L. 116-152) to provide up to \$1.9 billion a year through 2025 for deferred maintenance needs across NPS, USFS, FWS and BLM lands through the establishment of the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund, funded primarily by fees and royalties for offshore oil and gas drilling operations in federal waters.
13. The extended shutdowns of the federal government in 2013 and 2018-2019 caused millions of dollars of lost revenue for gateway communities, which are mostly rural and whose economies are highly reliant on tourism. These shutdowns also caused significant harm directly to the NPS system through staff furloughs, diminished revenue, lost recreational and educational opportunities, and damage to natural resources. During these shutdowns, some states entered into agreements with the U.S. Department of the Interior to keep certain national parks open and lost millions of dollars that were never recouped.

B. GOVERNORS' POLICY STATEMENT

1. Western Governors understand that not every state or territory approaches public land management in the same way. However, Western Governors recognize the role of our system of public lands, in economic development, development of social values, positive

³ Deferred Maintenance of Federal Land Management Agencies: FY2011-FY2020 Estimates and Issues. Congressional Research Service. November 30, 2021. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43997>

health benefits, and recreational opportunities, which benefit our citizens, the region, nation, and world.

2. Western Governors support efforts to provide public access to and at the same time protect iconic public land features, venues and landmarks so as to ensure and maintain their economic, cultural and historic values.
3. Consultation and coordination between federal land managers and Governors' offices is needed to improve cross-boundary management of ecological, economic, and cultural resources, and to increase sustainable outdoor recreation opportunities.
4. Western Governors encourage the BLM, USFS, FWS and NPS to partner with State Parks and appropriate Offices of Outdoor Recreation to improve outcomes and efficiencies related to expanded visitor services, resource protection, cost-sharing, staff training, educational programming, and other shared goals.
5. Western Governors request that Congress and the federal agencies consider whether tools like Good Neighbor Authority, which allows USFS and BLM to enter into agreements with states to do critical forest management work, could be utilized to improve management of popular outdoor recreation areas on federal lands that do not have adequate infrastructure, services and staff. Congress should ensure that BLM, USFS, FWS and NPS are provided the necessary authority to enter such agreements with states.
6. Western Governors urge Congress, the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture to explore additional strategies to accommodate increased visitation and improve visitor experiences. Strategies that reduce the concentration of visitors rather than limit the total number of visitors are needed to protect visitor experience while maintaining public lands for all. Western Governors particularly urge improving, modernizing and expanding visitor facilities, attracting investment to create new visitor destinations, using technology and real-time data sharing to diffuse overcrowding issues with traffic and parking, and exploring the expanded use of public transit and shuttles, bike and e-bike rentals, and other efforts to decrease vehicle congestion while maintaining visitor access.
7. Western Governors encourage NPS to promote an agency culture that is welcoming, customer service oriented, and reflective of the agency's mission to provide for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of the public.
8. Western Governors urge federal land managers to coordinate with gateway communities and tourism offices to develop plans for sustainable visitation.
9. Public land access is critically important in the West. The permitting process should be streamlined and coordinated across federal land management agencies to provide users a faster and more accessible experience. Reforming the complex permitting system for guides and outfitters would also better support small businesses in gateway communities and rural areas.
10. Western Governors urge Congress to appropriately fund federal land management agencies to provide for the routine maintenance and operation costs of important visitor

infrastructure, particularly roads and utility systems, and to find innovative ways to attract private investment for improving, modernizing and expanding visitor facilities.

11. Western Governors urge Congress to extend funding for the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund beyond 2025 and examine longer term solutions to the deferred maintenance backlog.
12. Congress and the land management agencies should also address workforce housing needs where they are unable to recruit and retain employees due to the exorbitant cost of living or acute housing shortages.
13. Western Governors believe maintenance of national parks and other public land recreation facilities is first and foremost a federal responsibility. However, Western Governors support the federal government pursuing public-private partnerships to improve, modernize and expand visitor services and visitor facilities and to provide for the maintenance and operation of other critical public land infrastructure that supports land management and visitation.
14. Western Governors recognize the troubling trend of intentional and unintentional damage of indigenous and other historical and cultural sites. As many of the sites are located on federally managed lands, Western Governors support additional resources to protect and promote awareness of stewardship of these sensitive cultural resources.
15. Western Governors recommend the federal government take all necessary action to avoid lapses in funding and potential harmful impacts to federal lands, particularly NPS units within the states and major tourist attractions in the West.
16. During any lapse in funding, Western Governors recommend the federal government work collaboratively with states and follow through on any commitments it makes to those that undertake extraordinary measures to support their national parks and other public land recreation resources.

C. **GOVERNORS' MANAGEMENT DIRECTIVE**

1. The Governors direct WGA staff to work with Congressional committees of jurisdiction, the Executive Branch, and other entities, where appropriate, to achieve the objectives of this resolution.
2. Furthermore, the Governors direct WGA staff to consult with the Staff Advisory Council regarding its efforts to realize the objectives of this resolution and to keep the Governors apprised of its progress in this regard.

This resolution will expire in June 2025. Western Governors enact new policy resolutions and amend existing resolutions on a semiannual basis. Please consult <http://www.westgov.org/resolutions> for the most current copy of a resolution and a list of all current WGA policy resolutions.